

# Connecting with Citizens

## *The Emotional Rhetoric of Norwegian and Danish Municipal Websites*

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### **Abstract**

This article suggests that current research on the use of new digital technologies by the public sector should move beyond its focus on their facility for e-government and e-democracy. It is important to observe that the same technologies can also be a resource for developing public enthusiasm and identification with local authorities by adopting a rhetoric of friendship. The backdrop of the study is the forthcoming Norwegian reform of municipal structure, informed by a similar reform in Denmark in 2006/2007. If Norway, like Denmark, significantly reduces its number of municipalities, the majority of municipalities will undergo significant change and risk losing citizens' sense of local identity. Each new municipality will need to create meaningful community building to ease the public's fear of losing their good life. The study examines how municipalities reach out to connect with their publics, and whether they employ emotional and engaging discourse to achieve this. Our data consist of twenty Norwegian and twenty Danish municipal websites.

**Keywords:** Aristotelian friendship, emotional appeals, discourses of citizen identity, citizen relationships, citizen services

### **Introduction**

Norwegian municipalities have been busy profiling themselves as modern and innovative for some time already (Wæraas & Bjørnå 2011), but they have been significantly increasing their efforts in this arena in anticipation of the expected merger of 428 municipalities into 354 by 2020 (The Office of the Prime Minister 2017). The majority of merging municipalities will be radically transformed and forced to adopt inauthentic identities that could potentially estrange their existing publics. Clearly, any attempt to develop a new and attractive municipal face representing two or more municipalities merged for administrative purposes will require the new municipality to adopt a participatory rhetoric to show genuine concern for the welfare of its citizens. Arguments for economic growth, centralized municipality structure and improved quality of services dominate the public debate, whereas questions about core values, complicit democracy, local community, identity and belonging have been left unaddressed (Christie 2016; Moltubak 2016).

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Norwegian municipalities are subject to a state regulated communication policy, which mandates that they practise values such as democracy, professionalization, openness and participation (Report to the Storting no.19: 2008/2009). The purpose of this policy was to make communications more efficient, e.g. by introducing interactive services, providing social sites, systematizing feedback, and activating passive user groups.

We expect that the existing 428 municipalities have already acted on this policy and adopted relevant practices that will become instructive for the new municipalities in facilitating conversations with disparate groups of citizens. Citizens have a natural inclination to want to trust, feel proud of and belong to a particular street, neighbourhood or other locally defined area. To stir these feelings, municipalities may supplement their websites with emotional content that is engaging and meaningful to members of the community.

Municipal e-governments are still informed by a new public management culture. We also expect most Norwegian municipalities to be at an early stage in building more emotionally informed relationships with citizens as the municipal merger draws closer. Once Norway moves ahead with the expected merger, the new and larger municipalities will have new names, new stories to tell and new identities to build together with new citizens.

On the assumption that a public discourse of emotions will increasingly inform our communal character and our publicness (Smith & Hyde 1991), this article analyses and discusses how municipalities reach out to their people and publics, and whether they appeal to emotions in order to achieve this. Our data draws on Norwegian and Danish municipal discourses. The Danish municipality reform from 2006/2007 has been central in preparing the Norwegian merger, and the current Danish website discourses will be informative in understanding the opportunities and challenges that will accompany the Norwegian transition.

## **Citizen participation on municipal websites**

The proliferation of municipal websites has sparked a flurry of research into local government's role as provider of public services and facilitator of citizens' participation in local political debate. The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support the sophisticated platforms for e-government has enabled municipal authorities to develop websites with huge potential for informing, engaging and interacting with members of the local community. This has caused lawmakers to support digital solutions and to regulate the communicative behaviour of government bodies on the web. In the Nordic region, diminishing state funding has further motivated councils to make a shift to e-government as a way of becoming more cost-efficient within a pervasive culture of New Public Management. In Norway, many municipalities have nevertheless been initially challenged by the cost of launching their own websites (Flak, Olsen & Wolcott 2005). It is apparent that the municipal sector's mandatory switch to digital communications with citizens has been fraught with multiple challenges.

In Norway and Denmark, central governments have issued standards to guide the implementation of municipal websites. Flak, Olsen & Wolcott (2005: 43) note, however, that "the functionality and quality of content vary greatly" across Norwegian municipalities' websites. Denmark adopted similar but more complex models for gaug-

ing public websites as instruments of e-government. These different efforts to assess e.g. user-friendliness, accessibility and interactive features aim to maintain smooth and cost-effective communication as personal encounters between citizens and authorities are speedily being replaced by digital ones.

The primary tasks for municipalities in both Norway and Denmark have been to utilise e-government's facilities not only to display available services and upcoming events but also to create transparency by explaining how local government functions and responds to public needs. Flak, Olsen & Wolcott (2005: 42) "identified a more citizen-centric approach" in Norwegian local administration. An immediately related but often secondary objective has been to expand e-government with facilities for e-democracy to strengthen the citizenry's identification and engagement with local issues and political decision-making. One of the most used instruments for achieving a more participatory style of local government has been to give members of the general public access to democratic debate via interactive web fora in the form of bulletin or debate boards, chat rooms and social media.

Research on municipal websites in the Nordic region has naturally attempted to account for advances on these twin objectives as they essentially define municipal web communication policy. Haug & Jansen (2004: 9) found evidence of a preoccupation among Norwegian municipal authorities with e-government, but they concluded that "Norwegian municipalities' websites are much more commonly used for one way information rather than citizens' participation".

Prior to the Danish municipal merger in 2007, Torpe & Nielsen conducted a survey of 275 municipal websites. In the study, the authors noted that "local authorities seem to be more interested in e-government than in e-democracy [and] have primarily linked the advantages of ICT with municipal service provision" (Torpe & Nielsen 2004: 232-240). Christensen obtained a very similar result in a study of 188 Finnish municipalities' websites, causing him to suggest that they "largely use their websites to inform citizens on on-going decision-making processes, thereby strengthening the traditional representative democracy rather than deepening the democratic involvement of citizens" (2013: 3). In a more recent study, Olsen & Solstad (2013) found that Norwegian municipal websites take very different approaches to communicating with local inhabitants. They tentatively conclude that even well-established websites fail to exploit the democratic involvement of citizens.

Studies outside the Nordic area have reported similar issues and challenges. O'Toole, for instance, conducted an extensive survey of e-governance across Australia's more than 700 local government bodies and concluded that "[t]he next phase in the development of e-government at local level will be a test of whether local governments continue to develop their Web sites towards more participatory models of e-governance" (2007: 72).

While municipal websites are designed to project services, information and the tangible and emotional values of the municipality to their core users, they are also strongly focussed on additional stakeholders, including tourists, prospective residents and local news media. In a study of city council websites in New Zealand, Florek, Insch & Gnoth (2006) point out that local services, facilities, picture galleries and municipal logos are part and parcel of such "place branding". However, they note that the intangible values and attitudes that also define the municipality are equally important to a website's new visitors. Winsvold (2007) found that while members of the Norwegian public generally

consider the websites an unattractive source of information, local news media rely extensively on them to develop stories for their audiences. Winsvold was, however, unable to conclude whether the websites effectively enhance citizens' involvement in public debate.

Taken together, these and other studies (e.g. Jansen & Ølnes 2004; Ask, Hatakka & Grönlund 2008) suggest that municipal websites have in their early formats served an informational role which mostly allows them to generate passive citizen participation. There is, however, nothing that inherently prevents municipalities from exploiting the functionalities of the new digital technologies if they want to build a symmetrical relationship with their citizenry, creating motivation and involvement through a more emotional public discourse (see e.g. Dolson & Young 2012; Larsson 2013; Storsul 2014).

## **Introducing emotions to municipal websites**

Current research of municipal websites does not show that websites effectively increase citizens' involvement in local affairs. Neither have they become a driver of a more deliberative and engaging style of democracy and participation. We suggest that future research should look beyond e-government and e-democracy to investigate municipal websites' and social media's possible contribution to avoiding a wider gap and concerns about 'democratic deficit', using different means to develop citizens' trust and enthusiasm for their new and larger municipality.

With emotional content about the good life of the community, the website can become a central resource in developing citizens' positive motivation towards and social involvement with their new municipality. In other words, the municipal website may ideally form the home base for its social media platform in referring to the attributes, characteristics and emotions of the new municipality's offerings.

Not unexpectedly, we see that municipal websites contain long lists of public services, facts about the municipality, announcements of local events, and general information about Norway and Denmark. This is a rhetoric relying extensively on information-based statements, apparently without any moral reasoning or value-based argumentation. Wæraas & Bjørnå (2011: 230) describe the Norwegian municipality as "heavy, anonymous, dull and over-administered". What is less apparent is whether this pervasive delivery of facts and information can, on closer examination, be shown to incorporate non-salient elements of emotion to connect with citizens.

Municipal websites are increasingly required to accommodate new citizens fleeing from foreign war zones, to cater for the needs of a growing population of senior citizens, and to service a seemingly bottomless demand for full-day kindergartens and kindred facilities. We do not suspect that municipal authorities are oblivious of the changing demands on their online services and communication practices. However, we note that they continue to 'under-communicate' the values, participation, openness and inclusiveness that appear to be increasingly defining expectations of local democracy in a Scandinavian context.

## **A framework for understanding emotions on municipal websites**

Appeal to emotions plays a vital part in persuasion, both in everyday discourse (Smith & Hyde 1991), and in organizational rhetoric (Hoffman & Ford 2010). Today, communica-

tion professionals practise what every rhetorician has always been preaching, namely that a message meant to move, engage and commit must appeal to people's emotions, as "intellectual conviction is often not enough to move people to act" (Corbett & Connors 1999: 84). Yet, emotion seems to be widely under-communicated, in particular in times of crises and change (Mral 2008; Svennevig & Isaksson 2014).

Appeals, especially to needs, values and identification, are effective sources of persuasion through emotion in organizational messages (Hoffman & Ford 2010: 29). However, while such appeals are useful in guiding us to identify potential web texts with emotionally charged language, we find them often overlapping and impersonally rendered rather than targeted at citizens and their core values. To be able to analytically isolate individual people, citizens' participation and relationship building with the public, a more citizen-centric approach is called for.

Aristotle's analysis of *pathos* in *Rhetoric* is credited by Heidegger as the "first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another" (Smith & Hyde 1991: 449). Encouraged by Heidegger's understanding of Aristotle's *pathos*, Smith & Hyde believe that "emotions help to structure the existential temporality and spatiality of our communal existence". The idea that emotions contribute to an everydayness of being with others gives us a theoretical rationale for identifying three types of municipal discourses of emotionally charged language: discourses of identity, services and relationships. To further understand the types of emotions used in these discourses, and how they become attractive to others, we turn to classical rhetoric.

*Pathos* in classical rhetoric defines the emotions and the extent to which the speaker is able to involve and move the audience to do something. Friendship, one of Aristotle's positive emotions, symbolises the person who "shares one's pleasure in good things and one's pains in painful ones for no other reason than for the sake of their friend" (Aristotle 1991: 150). It includes a sense of long-term commitment to 'good and bad days', and captures the idea of self-sacrifice, mutuality and loyalty. In a similar manner, the municipalities' mission is to serve their citizens in good times as well as bad times.

Aristotle's three kinds of friendship (Aristotle 1998; Pangle 2008) show us something important about how the use of emotions may foster a sense of community and connectedness in municipality website rhetoric. The three kinds of friendship are friendships of *utility*, friendships of *pleasure*, and perfect friendships, also referred to as friendships of *goodness*.

Aristotle (1998: 195) explains that those who love each other for their utility "do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other". Additionally, people who love for the sake of pleasure do not love each other for their character, but because they find them pleasant. The friendships of utility and pleasure are "imperfect", in contrast to "perfect" friendships of goodness. According to Pangle (2008), perfect friendship is central to Aristotle's view of friendship. A perfect friend is someone who likes another person for the sake of the other person, and not for some incidental benefit they provide each other. The three types of friendship give a focussed perspective on the role of the municipality as a provider and relationship-builder, and as a political institution not governed by self-interest and profit.

Based on Aristotle's notion that each person loves what is or seems best for himself or herself (Pangle 2008: 43), friendships based on goodness are the best form of friendship with a higher good as the end. In comparison, friendships of pleasure and utility which

either “revolve around the pleasures of the body” or “turn upon material advantage” are more “defective” forms of friendship.

What is perhaps hard to imagine is a municipality-citizen relationship defined by perfect friendships of goodness. To account for this aloofness, we turn to contemporary rhetoric for further means to substantiate appeals to friendships of goodness. Smith & Hyde (1991: 450-453) see the intensity of emotions as a function of identification in personal relationships. Burke (1984) posited that human beings seek identification and create connections through language to overcome cognitive and emotional divisions. One of Burke’s approaches to building identification with an audience is by the use of the assumed ‘we’ (Cheney 1983). The use of ‘we’ creates a sense of shared views and values, of communion and togetherness, what Burke (1969) called “consubstantiality” or an acting together; in Aristotelian terms, an act of goodness. Thus, municipality rhetoric aiming for citizen bonding and benevolence may invite citizens to identify with the municipality by instantiating the use of ‘we’.

This overview explains our foundation for accounting for how Norwegian and Danish municipalities connect with their publics, and for making sense of emotional municipality rhetoric.

## **Collecting the evidence**

Our data consists of twenty Norwegian and twenty Danish municipal websites collected in April 2015. As most municipalities update the information on their websites regularly, we extracted the website data from 29-30 September 2015 for in-depth analysis. We limited our data to include only the home page, because the home page accounts for a strategically important first encounter with the municipality. This is the page where municipalities manage their self-image to make a good first impression. It is the page that gives the municipality a straightforward opportunity to emotionally connect with its publics. Our preference for the single home page was guided by an aim for consistency and reliable comparison with respect to content, at the cost of more extensive and varied data. Concentrating on one page also had the advantage of making the results more immediately transparent and accessible. On the home page, we expected to find information most relevant to citizens’ needs and available services, highlights of current news and community events involving people. Particularly, this is the site of “place branding” (Wæraas & Bjørnå 2011: 234; Jørgensen 2015), where the municipality can profile its unique identity and differentiate itself from other municipalities.

We collected data from five Norwegian counties and the five Danish regions. Geographically, the Danish data represent Denmark in its entirety. The selection of five out of nineteen Norwegian counties was guided by geographical and urban-rural contrasts. For example, we obtained municipal home pages from rural Finnmark in the north, rural Aust-Agder in the south and urban Akershus and Buskerud in Eastern Norway. Norwegian municipalities vary a great deal with respect to size, resources, demography, economy and industries (Wæraas & Bjørnå 2011). Particularly, the geographical contrasts between northern and southern Norway are significant. The Danish and Norwegian data consists of four municipalities from each county, two large and two small ones.

A two-step procedure was established in order to identify citizens and publics. We first identified people and publics in texts and visuals on the municipal home page. Three



main questions guided our data selection: what is the municipality (1) saying about people (identity), (2) doing with people (relationships) and (3) providing for people (services). We included all visuals of people, unless it was clear that the individual(s) in the picture were representatives of the municipality. We only selected texts with a clear reference to the general public, to individuals or to groups, identified by labels like “children and parents”, “family”, “youth” or “your seniors”. We also included text containing pronouns like “you” and the assumed “we”. Our search for potentially emotionally charged texts and visuals thus produced a data set with three types of municipality discourse: discourse on the identity of citizens, discourse on the relationship with citizens and discourse on the provision of services for citizens.

In the second step, we analysed the data for three types of Aristotelian friendships: (1) friendship of goodness, (2) friendship of utility and (3) friendship of pleasure. We thus collected data indicating municipalities’ attempts to appeal to citizens’ goodness, as in the example “Do you have room for one more?” (Ringerike Municipality, NOR), or appeals to utility imbuing the municipality with friendship, as in “Assistance with digital self-service” (Hjørring Municipality, DK). Finally, we obtained data showing appeals to pleasure, as in “A healthy life in a healthy municipality” (Rebild Municipality, DK). We also recognised the possibility that the three types of discourses were void of rhetoric on friendship. This allowed us to compare how Norwegian and Danish municipalities prioritize emotions by using friendly and benevolent rhetoric.

Thus, our methodology was a straightforward content analysis. We first assessed the three types of emotionally charged texts and visuals. We then examined the three types of Aristotelian emotions evoked by friendship appeals across the different types of texts and visuals. In this manner, the study was designed to identify and evidence municipal rhetorical practice.

## **The rhetoric of municipal friendship**

Anyone wanting to contact or collect information about a municipality will simply open a web browser and navigate to the relevant website. The first page visitors will see is variously referred to as the “home”, “front” or “start” page, and it will link them to layers of underlying content pages.

The data set collected unequivocally demonstrates that the municipalities of the two countries follow a traditional and fairly straightforward approach to designing their websites. Everything is set up in a highly linear fashion, and there is no experimentation taking place with alternative shapes, styles or formats. The effect of this is that text is presented almost exclusively in the form of quite inconspicuous bulleted lists or pictograms, while pictures appear as a mix of public and personal snapshots. An often-used feature on municipal home pages is a photo, or a series of rotating photos or images, at the very top of the page that functions as an attention-grabbing header hovering above three or more columns of listed services or columns of pictograms symbolising such services. The following home page from the Norwegian municipality of Bærum illustrates the format that is recurrent in our data:



**Illustration 1.** Front page of the Bærum municipality

For our particular purpose of accounting for a citizen-focussed rhetoric of emotions, we identified the pictures showing adults and children engaging in a variety of activities, including sports and walks in nature, separating them from pictures without people. We excluded pictures of scenery, which are particularly recurrent in Norwegian home pages, as well as aerial photos of city skylines, public buildings and other such facilities. We also excluded text that (1) had no direct bearing on the lives of citizens, (2) did not unfold the meeting between citizens and public officials or (3) were unrelated to the services offered to citizens by the municipality. Text that we thus disregarded because it was falling outside our citizen-oriented discourse frames was, for example, reports about budget negotiations or a resurfacing of roads on an industrial estate.

### *Discourses of identity, relationships and services*

The mapping of the relevant discourses of citizen identity, citizen relationship and citizen services gave us a clear-cut data set lending itself to rhetorical analysis. In this way, we were able to identify the municipalities' different approaches to embracing or catering to citizens and capture matching rhetoric of emotions. By comparing the three types of discourse, we see that the Danish municipalities are more immediately concerned with explaining aspects of local identity, relationships and services. Out of sixty identified instances of such discourse, the Danish municipalities had a total of thirty-five, as compared to twenty-eight Norwegian instances. Examining the data in closer detail, we found only seven Danish and six Norwegian instances where the municipalities communicated citizen services and simultaneously infused the message with emotion. As indicated in the example below, this was done by personalising the offer with the request, "Become a training partner" and by issuing an invitation to participate, "Offers a FREE course". This was supplemented by flagging the municipality's ability to collaborate with a number of different stakeholders:



Become a training partner! Hammerfest Municipality offers a FREE course sponsored by Extra Foundation and Finnmark County Authority. In collaboration with sports clubs/clubs in the municipality and the Finnmark sports authority.

This instance, which focuses on the provision of a “free course”, differs essentially from a discourse of citizen identity that is solely concerned with identifying individual citizens or groups of citizens, often by the direct request to “you”, as illustrated by our next examples:

- Would you like to start a company? (Bodø Municipality, NOR)
- You have a duty to report (Rebild Municipality, DK)
- Do you know an entrepreneur who deserves to be honoured? (Grimstad Municipality, NOR)

Our analysis showed that a discourse of citizen identity is more frequently used visually than textually. The Norwegian municipalities addressed identities through twenty-eight visuals and seven texts. The Danish municipal websites included twenty-three visuals and seventeen texts pertaining to citizen identity. Identities presented visually were usually depictions of citizens engaging in different sorts of activities:



**Illustration 2.** From the page of the Arendal municipality

The discourse of citizen relationships highlights the municipality’s efforts to build relationships with its public by way of sharing activities, distributing invitations, arranging meetings and disclosing events and happenings between the municipality and the public. The most direct approach to such efforts is for a municipality to announce its commitment to be in touch with its public. Nevertheless, this occurred infrequently in our data in the pure forms illustrated by the following examples:

- How may we help you? (Flå Municipality, NOR)
- The service office helps you. (Hammerfest Municipality, NOR)
- Help us to become better at safeguarding you. (Næstved Municipality, DK)

Interestingly, our data contained few visuals of the physical meetings between public officials and citizens to portray the building of relationships. In one of these rare instances, we saw the mayor of a Danish municipality meeting, not with ordinary citizens, but with members of the local business community.



**Illustration 3.**  
*From the page of the  
Odder municipality (DK)*

### *Appeals to friendship: Utility, pleasure, goodness*

The data showed only small differences between the Danish and Norwegian home pages across the three types of discourse. However, the quantitative and qualitative differences were more conspicuous regarding the emotional appeals. Not only did Danish home pages use twice as many emotional appeals (115) than the Norwegian pages (fifty-seven), the Norwegian home pages also had a visual orientation, while the Danish home pages were driven by text. We thus concluded that the Danish municipalities pursue a citizen friendly rhetoric, both textually and visually, that is not an immanent feature of Norwegian municipal discourse. Surprisingly, however, the Norwegians chose to emphasize different friendship values, with little priority given to utility (ten occurrences), in stark contrast to their Danish counterparts (fifty-seven occurrences). The Danish utility appeal functioned primarily as a relationship booster rather than as a provider of services, confirming that the municipality is there for you when needed. For instance, the welcome greeting of the Danish mayor of Frederiksberg is considerate and personal, yet instructive and informative, in its efforts to meet the everyday needs of the citizen:

At this site, you can handle your business with Frederiksberg Municipality and follow how the city develops and political decisions that matter to you. If you are new to the town, you can read my words of welcome here. (Frederiksberg Municipality, DK)

In the Dragør and Morsø municipalities, we found prime examples of Danish utility appeals. In these municipalities, the local citizens were presented with lists of ten and fourteen, respectively, everyday needs provided for, including practical advice, as illustrated by the following example:

Now, what if ... your hedge needs trimming, your child is ready for nursery, you want to tell about a road, you need a new health insurance card ... (Dragør Municipality, DK)

Other Danish municipalities likewise espoused similar caring agendas powered by utility appeals. In this way, they took on a role of being responsible and concerned, almost parental, as in the following hands-on appeal: “Are you a property owner? Check here what you need to remember and what you may expect of the municipality” (Silkeborg Municipality, DK).

Compared to the Danish municipalities, the Norwegians under-communicated utility, and preferred to profile themselves through appeals to pleasure. Practically all of the Norwegian municipal web pages’ visuals showed happy people of all ages, mostly involved in various outdoor activities. Even a relatively everyday and unadventurous event such as the opening of a new cycle and footpath was visualized as a festive ribbon cutting ceremony performed by children in a forestry landscape, rather than an urban scene. Many municipalities also attributed pleasure and fun to senior citizens “på tur” (hiking) in the mountains. Playing on the word “café”, the text heading of this visual also attempts to advertise the exercise programme, “Trimkafeen” (Fitness café), as a leisurely and relaxed social event rather than a necessity.



**Illustration 4.** From the page of the Rollag municipality (NOR). **Illustration 5.** From the Hammerfest municipality (NOR). **Illustration 6.** From the Alta municipality (NOR)

Although focussed more on utility appeals, the Danish municipalities also attached great value to pleasure (forty-one instances), while demonstrating a thematic diversity not present on the Norwegian websites. We found art and cultural events balanced with exercise, the outdoors, and references to local business of various professions, including doctors and patients, social workers, and with refugees. The link between pleasure and nature is practically absent from the Danish websites; in fact, only a couple of Danish municipalities make use of the kind of panoramic pictures that we found in many Norwegian municipalities’ pages.

Appeals to goodness (sixteen) were more conspicuous than appeals to utility (ten) in the Norwegian data, but are the least prominent of the friendship appeals in the Danish data (seventeen). Appeals to goodness usually employ words and texts attributing compassion, self-sacrifice and benevolence, occasionally to the citizens, and occasionally to the municipality. The goodness appeal thus has a dual function as illustrated by the following examples. Vevelstad Municipality (NOR) has a special emergency number for relatives of victims, “Next-of-kin telephone line”. Here, the municipality is the compassionate party caring for the citizens by providing them with a special service. This contrasts with the following examples in which the citizens are the benevolent party invested with qualities of goodness:

- Foster home campaign: Do you have room for one more? (Træna Municipality, NOR)

- Have a ‘kitchen chat’ with your elders ... With a few simple tweaks, you can contribute to reducing the danger of fire with elders you care for. (Grimstad Municipality, NOR)

Both examples appeal to people’s voluntary and benevolent behaviour, and such rhetoric is included in several Norwegian municipalities’ web pages. The Danish municipalities used a similar questioning technique to demonstrate their caring nature: “Do you need inspiration to start in education or in a job?” (Gentofte Municipality, DK), “Need help?” (Odder Municipality, DK). However, unlike the Norwegian municipalities, they appealed to goodness with municipality officials interacting with refugees or senior citizens. Finally, the goodness appeal can also be reciprocal, as in the slogan “Together for Hammerfest” (NOR).

### *Friendship as strategy*

Friendship is a central emotional appeal for municipalities taking a strategic approach to creating or retaining high levels of identification with their publics. While Norwegian and Danish municipalities at first glance appear to be using very mixed bags of emotional visuals and texts, we detected some convergence across the two countries. We were able to discern three emerging rhetorical patterns of friendship: one Norwegian friendship strategy of pleasure, also shared by the Danish municipalities, one Danish friendship strategy of utility, and one friendship strategy of goodness shared by both the Norwegian and Danish municipalities.

If we venture to highlight a typical Norwegian friendship strategy, we find it most evidently expressed through pleasure appeals projecting citizen identities (twenty-five), typically illustrated by pictures showing happy people engaged in outdoor activities. Even the odd instance of pleasure textually projected through a poem is evidence of citizen identity, as it pays tribute to a historically important local citizen of the municipality. The pleasure appeals, obviously the most ‘natural’ visual identification boosters, were a recurring feature of the Danish municipal landscape, but unlike the Norwegian pages, often enhanced with a supplementary text. The picture of granny biking with her grandson wrapped up by an adjoining text, “opportunity for wind blowing through your hair; cross-generational meet on bike” (Lemvig Municipality, DK), demonstrates a rhetorical awareness of how the pleasure appeal can be used strategically to promote friendship and shape identities.

Secondly, we gleaned a typical Danish friendship strategy from our data, finding it to include the use of utility appeals to give citizen services and citizen relationships a distinct quality of friendship. In a citizen-friendly rhetoric interspersed with utility appeals, the municipalities build relationships around the everyday chores of personal life: “Receive answers via Facebook. We are active on social media – follow us and receive relevant information and a quick reply”; “Give input to a new district in the centre of Roskilde” (Roskilde Municipality, DK). Alternatively, they communicate such messages by way of their services: “If you are moving, enrolling your child in a nursery, booking a room, putting up a building, taking the ferry, applying for a driver’s licence” (Morsø Municipality). The Danish municipalities consistently demonstrated how the strategic use of utility appeals can infuse citizen services and relationships with notes of friendship.



Finally, the strategy of goodness seems to be relevant to the online messages put forth by both the Norwegian and the Danish municipalities, though clearly more important to the Norwegians. Whether use of goodness appeals is a deliberate strategic choice by these municipalities is unclear. However, some of the overly ‘friendly’ examples suggest that this might be the case, as in the following instances:

- Become a foster or relief family. If, out of the desire of your heart, you want to make a difference for a child? (Esbjerg Municipality DK)
- Become your authentic self. (Næstved Municipality, DK)

The use of rhetorical exaggeration in the hyperbole “desire of your heart” may be stylistically banal, yet perhaps precisely therefore taken as a serious attempt to let citizens be guided by emotions rather than by duty. Although the invitation to become your “authentic self” sounds like the title of a lecture, and not the municipality’s request to its citizens, it supports the image of a municipality with a genuine persona.

Our observations that both Danish and Norwegian goodness appeals share the same prime function, namely to build citizen relationships, suggests that appealing to goodness is a deliberate municipal strategy of friendship.

## How does the municipality talk to you?

As a provider of services, safety and emotional security (Hoffman & Ford 2010) for local citizens, the municipality has great impact on people’s everyday domestic and personal lives. How municipalities, as public and political institutions, balance their language between a public and a more personal rhetoric will eventually define and affect their relationship with citizens. How open and personal can municipalities be without being too personal? How do they stage themselves as professional and friendly, using discourse that is not bureaucratic or boring? How do they best motivate citizens to participate in online dialogue? Municipal officials know that citizens consult the municipality out of necessity and prefer them do it online.

The Danish municipal websites demonstrated a strong orientation toward textual content with almost twice as many texts (seventy-five) than visuals (forty). Compared to Norwegian websites, which showed slightly more visuals (thirty) than texts (twenty-seven), the Danish texts are more coherent and longer. In addition, they imbue their texts more consistently with a friendly, citizen-oriented rhetoric. One obvious way to do this is to address the individual citizen, using the familiar personal pronoun ‘you’, or to address the entire public with the inclusive ‘we’. Both the Danish and the Norwegian municipalities showed much the same strategic use of ‘you’ in direct questions, as we see in Bærum Municipality (NOR), where the website opened with a personal question addressed to ‘you’. However, many of the Norwegian municipalities did not provide the solution or answer to their own questions, which arguably makes the questions appear like soundbites, as in “Do you have room for one more?” (Træna Municipality, Ringerike Municipality), and “Worried?” (Asker Municipality). Thus, Norwegian municipalities missed the opportunity for dialogue and “being close”, which “allows the identification to take place” (Smith & Hyde 1991: 453).

Hammerfest Municipality was an exception in our Norwegian data. The website demonstrated “a dimension of immediacy and presence” (Smith & Hyde 1991: 453). It

provided substantiating questions and exclamations with answers and accompanying pictures, as well as a slogan that seeks identification and togetherness.

Other ways to use the assumed 'we' to engage citizens in municipal life can be observed in the Danish municipalities' dialogical use of utility appeals. The Gentofte website invited the visitor to give an opinion: "Be heard! We would like to hear your opinion about how the municipality is developing." The Frederiksberg Municipality, too, invited citizens into a dialogue with the municipality and to take on the role of providers instead of consumers of services: "Tell us about it. If, on the streets or in the parks of Frederiksberg, you come across things that need fixing, then we will see to it that it is dealt with!"

We thus observed, in contrast to the Norwegians, that the Danish municipalities were considerably more dialogical in their efforts to use friendship rhetoric to involve citizens and have them participate in and contribute to municipal life. The Norwegian municipalities appeared less inclined to take advantage of an emotionally inspired rhetoric of friendship to allow identification with their citizens.

However, we also observed that the open and friendly tone elicited by the informal use of 'you' was a recurring strategy used by the municipalities in both countries to invoke friendship with the individual citizen. Yet, and somewhat to our surprise, the majority of municipalities in both countries did not take the opportunity to establish a sense of sharing and pride by adopting an assumed 'we' to solicit identification from fellow citizens.

## **How does the municipality see you?**

While Hoffman & Ford (2010: 34) maintain that in organizations, "the human desire to identify is strong", our study suggested that municipal communication officers are not accustomed to unfolding the identification process of openness and inclusion. The inherent difficulty of pursuing this vested interest of identification, we argue, is reflected in their sporadic attempts at rhetorically manifesting friendships on their municipal home pages.

The difficulty in furthering identification becomes apparent when large and resourceful Norwegian and Danish municipalities, for example Bærum and Roskilde, streamlined their home pages, turning them into impersonal directories of services offered to citizens. In this process, they ridded their home pages of not only 'people content', but also of a sense of pride that can drive identification. This omission of appeals to friendship suggests that municipal communicators are reluctant to embrace citizens, thus excluding citizens with a sense of ownership and a desire to contribute to and support their municipality (cf. Stokes 2013).

That said, over half of the forty municipalities in our sample made an attempt to establish a sense of local, shared identity, but did so by primarily representing citizens visually, invoking a sense of pleasure by showing them at play or interacting in some communal activity. We also observed that municipalities expected pictures to be self-explanatory, and, particularly as to the Norwegian municipalities, seldom accompanied them with words that capture the emotions of citizens. The Norwegian municipalities thus appeared to generally disregard the important effect of words in helping citizens to interpret pictures as they were intended. When pictures that evoked a sense of pleasure



were supported by words, the words typically served to inform about time and place of an event and not the sensation experienced from participating in the event.

Consider a contrasting Danish example where a family is pictured sitting on the beach with their arms around one another. This picture was supported by the following text: “Become a foster or relief family. If, out of the desire of your heart, you want to make a difference for a child? We would like to invite you to an information evening” (Esbjerg Municipality, DK). Without the caption, the picture would alone represent a family together on the beach, which connotes emotions. With the caption, however, we learn and emotionally experience how a compassionate family is lending Esbjerg Municipality a helping hand, thus extending the picture’s inherent connotation.



**Illustration 7.** From the page of the Esbjerg municipality (DK)

Our analysis of how municipalities work with processes of identification showed several configurations of how this can be done. While there may be a real intention to reach out to citizens, the forty Norwegian and Danish home pages suggest that identification is frequently represented as something that alone resides with and among citizens and not between citizens and municipalities. Municipalities are essentially operating in ‘incognito mode’ and thus forfeit the privilege to establish an assumed ‘we’. The Danish municipal home pages used a textually focussed, emotional rhetoric to explain and support pictures serving to create identification between citizens more frequently than the Norwegian municipalities. While the differences are somewhat subtle, there is a clear impression that Danish municipal authorities have become more sensitive to the effect of words and images in building identification as a way of furnishing friendships with their citizens.

## Conclusion

Our study suggests that a pathos-driven municipal rhetoric of friendship is an essential but possibly underrated resource for building community and pursuing a 'good life'. A relevant consideration will be to utilise friendship appeals and to do this more strategically. By employing discourses of citizen identity, citizen relationships and citizen services, our article presents three complementary methods for recasting the friendship rhetoric that addresses various public needs for a shared local identity.

Norwegian municipalities may consider including both citizens and representatives of the municipality in pictures if they want to effectively construct an assumed 'we'. This will personalize and add concrete meanings and vibrancy to the otherwise tranquil landscapes and streamlined cityscapes. By the same token, adding captions to explain the pictures in Norwegian home pages will allow citizens to make greater sense and glean greater meaning from what they are observing. Citizens will in all likelihood be more favourably disposed towards a Norwegian reform process when their identification with the municipality is supported by a rhetoric that carefully balances their expectations of utility against their expectations of pleasure and goodness. Utility, pleasure and goodness nevertheless often become interlaced in a finely woven rhetorical fabric that reflects citizens' complex emotional relationship with their municipality. Thus, public facilities and venues, such as the town square or municipal sports arena, may also be symbolically important in connoting the emotions of the communal spirit and pride. Local sentiments can be vividly reflected on municipal websites through reference to festivals, ceremonies or to derbies between the local football team and teams from neighbouring municipalities.

Our results suggest that a rhetoric grounded in friendship requires an awareness of how appeals of utility, pleasure and goodness may inform the construction of such discourse. The Danish municipalities typically invoke their rhetoric of friendship by accounting for the utility of services, while their Norwegian counterparts are far more occupied with showcasing the pleasure of consuming such services via pictures. Interestingly, both Norwegian and Danish municipalities regularly depict citizens as 'consumers', enjoying some activity or service, but rarely as 'contributors' to some common municipal effort or in partnership with representatives of the municipality. The perfect friendship, or consubstantiality between a municipality and its citizens, is in principle unattainable. Nevertheless, the Norwegian and Danish municipalities have at times resorted to a rhetoric of goodness to verbalize such friendship. While such rhetoric may have a naivety about it, it may well speak to the hearts of citizens.

It is important to note that municipal councils have made strides to complement their websites with social media in recent years. Assuming that citizens will increasingly be motivated to follow their municipality on, particularly, Facebook and Twitter, municipal authorities have begun to establish social media as the new forum for town hall public debates and the more cursory day-to-day dialogues with citizens. This suggests a division of roles where the traditional website is designated to the core tasks of e-government and serving as a repository of fact and information for citizens, while social media becomes the venue for e-democracy and for building and supporting an emotionally driven local identity. In this perspective, future research on municipal communication strategies that involves the use of digital platforms should address how websites and social media can together, or separately, be rhetorically configured to establish stronger bonds of friendship with the next generation of media savvy citizens.

This article suggests that future research to examine how municipalities strategically employ the growing palette of digital technologies should not alone focus on their facility for e-government and e-democracy, and citizens' missing inclinations to participate. To complement our understanding of the potentials and limitations of new digital media, we should continue to use rhetorical analysis to chart how public websites bridge, or fail to bridge, the government-citizen gap as they seek to develop citizens' enthusiasm and identification with the municipality.

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